

Biography of St. Peter

Encyclopedia of World Biography¹

St. Peter (died ca. 65) is traditionally considered to be the head of the 12 Apostles and the first bishop of Rome.

Peter's original name was Simon, Peter being a name given him by Jesus. At the beginning of Jesus' public life, Peter was a grown man. This would place his birth sometime around the end of the 1st century B.C. Of his early life we know little except that he came from the village of Bethsaida in Galilee and that his father was a fisherman. By the time he met and joined Jesus, he was already married (Mark 1:30); he lacked any formal education (Acts 4:13) and worked the fishing nets with his father and his brother Andrew at the lakeside town of Capernaum. Andrew also joined the group of Jesus' disciples on the same day.

His Times

As far as can be judged, Peter was a member of the ordinary people of Palestine, who were normally considered by educated Jewish classes to belong to *Am harez*, the people of the land. This term was used in a derogatory fashion to describe those who were ignorant of the niceties and deeper values of Judaism and the Jewish way of life. In addition, Peter was a Galilean and therefore shared the spirit of independence and opposition to Jerusalem which was traditional in that northern province.

Recent researches into the daily life of the ordinary people in Palestine paint a fairly clear picture of Peter's social conditions: extreme poverty, a very fideistic [based on faith alone] approach to religion, a reliance on superstition, and an extreme dependence on the vagaries of natural elements. Furthermore, in the northern parts of Palestine, removed from proximate influence of Jerusalem, more revolutionary ideas easily took hold. Unrefined and undeveloped ideas about the Messiah and about the salvation of Israel easily took the form of political movements, extremist organizations, and a readiness to disassociate oneself from the authoritarian structure of southern Judaism.

The general atmosphere in Palestine when Peter reached his adult life in the mid-20s of the 1st century A.D. was one of tension over the universal presence of the Roman conqueror and foreboding born of a strictly religious persuasion that the arrival of the Jewish Messiah was imminent as the only possible solution for Israel's difficulties. Indeed, we find more than once in the Gospels that the followers of Jesus, headed by Peter, attempted to force Jesus to accept the role of king. Even after the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and the others asked him when and how he would restore the kingdom of Israel. It is certain that Peter's attachment to Jesus, at least in the beginning, was largely based on the persuasion that Jesus would indeed restore the kingdom of Israel and that Peter and the other Apostles would be leaders in the New Era.

Association with Jesus

Peter and Andrew were among the first to be chosen by Jesus to be his close followers. Thereafter Peter accompanied Jesus everywhere. Jesus gave Peter the added name of Cephas, an Aramaic appellation meaning "rock." This was translated into Greek as *Petros* (from the Greek

¹ <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/peter-st/>

petra, "rock") and became the Latin *Petrus* and the English Peter. The Gospels differ as to when Jesus conferred this name on him.

Throughout the public life of Jesus, Peter is represented in the Gospels as the spokesman and the principal member of Jesus' followers. He is the first named in all the lists given of these followers and was present with a privileged few at special occasions: when Jesus brought the daughter of Jairus back to life; when Jesus had a special communication with Moses and Elias on Mt. Tabor; and in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before Jesus died. Peter was the first of the Apostles to see Jesus after his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus, according to the Gospel, gave Peter special assignments, such as paying the tribute or tax to the authorities on behalf of Jesus and his group. Jesus also said that he would build his new organization on Peter's leadership (Matthew 16:17-19) and entrusted his followers and believers to him (John 21:15-19). Many commentators have thrown doubt on the texts which ascribe this special role to Peter, but it is certain that the Gospels thus present Peter as the chosen leader.

The same character is assigned to Peter in *Acts* and in the few references which we find in Paul's letters. Paul went to Jerusalem to see Peter and be approved by him. About 14 years later, it appears that Peter headed the Christian evangelization of the Jews, in distinction to Paul, who preached to the Gentiles, and to James, who was bishop of Jerusalem.

In the early days after the death of Jesus, Peter is presented in the *Acts* again as the leader of Jesus' followers. The Jewish Sanhedrin treated him as the leader, and he preached the first mass appeal to the Jerusalemites about Jesus. He also directed the economic life of the Christian community and decided who would be admitted to it. About 49, when the Christians faced their first major decision--whether to admit non-Jews to their group--it was Peter who received guidance from God and made a positive decision accepted by all the other followers of Jesus present. That there was a difference of opinion concerning doctrinal matters between himself and Paul is beyond doubt. Paul, besides, reproached Peter for a certain insincerity and even manifested independence from Peter.

We are told of various missionary trips which Peter undertook in order to preach about Jesus. He was finally imprisoned by Herod and released miraculously by an angel. He then "departed and went to another place" (Acts 12:17). After 49, we have no direct record in the *Acts* about Peter, and we have to rely on external testimony.

Roman Sojourn

From all we can learn and surmise, it does appear that Peter occupied a position of importance in Rome and was martyred there under the rule of Nero (37-68). The earliest testimony comes from a letter of Clement written about the year 96 in Rome. A letter of Ignatius of Antioch (died ca. 110) also implies Peter's presence and authority in Rome, as does the saying of Gaius, a Roman cleric (ca. 200). Gaius speaks of the Vatican shrine and the "founders" of this

church. Finally, all the early lists of the bishops of Rome start with Peter's name as the first bishop.

Excavations at the Vatican have yielded no cogent and conclusive evidence either of Peter's presence in Rome or of his burial beneath the Vatican. They have, however, uncovered an ancient shrine which dates from approximately 160. Collateral evidence suggests that it was the burial site of some venerated figure, and Roman Catholic tradition identifies that figure with Peter. There is no direct testimony in the New Testament that Peter's position as leader of the Apostles was meant to be passed on to his successors, the bishops of Rome, as the primacy of the popes over all of Christianity. This is a separate question and depends on subsequent Church development and evolution of its beliefs.

Tradition designates Peter as author of two letters which carry his name, although doubt has been thrown on Peter's authorship of at least the second. Various apocryphal documents which certainly date from the 2d century are ascribed to Peter. There is also the fragmentary Acts of Peter, which purports to relate how Peter ended his life as a martyr.

It appears from the first of the two letters ascribed to Peter that his outlook as a Jew and a Semite was never influenced by Greek or other non-Jewish thought. He reflects the mentality of a 1st-century Jew who believes that Jesus came as the Messiah of Israel and as the fulfillment of all Israel's promises and expectations. Some of Peter's statements would not now be acceptable to orthodox Christian thought. From what we know of Peter and his life, he seems to have made the transition from Palestine to Rome as from one Jewish community to another Jewish community, never fundamentally changing his instincts as a Jewish believer, except insofar as he totally accepted Jesus as the Messiah of Israel.